DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 596 UD 026 284

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TITLE District-Based and Community-Wide Planning To Address Student Dropout Prevention: A Discussion Paper.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Programs; Cooperative Programs; *Dropout Prevention; Dropout Programs; Dropouts; High Risk Students; High Schools; Middle Schools; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; School Activities; School Community Programs; *School Community Relationship; *School Districts; Secondary Education; Secondary Schools; *Urban Programs; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS California (San Diego); California (San Francisco); Massachusetts (Boston); Michigan (Detroit); New York (New York)

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the potential of school district-based and community-wide approaches to dropout prevention, and provides a summary of the goals and expected outcomes of the Consortium on Dropout Prevention, and the Urban Dropout Prevention Collaboratives Program. The Consortium on Dropout Prevention was formed to cooperatively gather and share information about dropout prevention practices by Boston, Detroit, New York City, San Diego, San Francisco, and four small suburban school districts. The Urban Dropout Prevention Collaboratives Program, funded by planning grants from the Ford Foundation, has begun actively developing dropout prevention programs in 21 cities, including Detroit, New York City, and San Diego. Summary conclusions from the Consortium's research and the Collaboratives' experiences include the following: (1) both community and school districts need good leadership; (2) community and districts must cooperate integrally; (3) each system should focus on different issues which can be resolved collaboratively; and (4) issues should be chosen that can be represented on a continuum of needs assessment, information gathering, resource identification, planning, and implementation activities. A 10-item list of footnotes is included. (FMW)

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DISTRICT-BASED AND COMMUNITY-WIDE PLANNING TO ADDRESS STUDENT DROPOUT PREVENTION: A DISCUSSION PAPER

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Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., April, 1987. The views presented in this paper are not necessarily those of the foundations or the school districts involved in described projects.

INTRODUCTION

Many school district superintendents were aware of the severe consequences of high student dropout rates before the problem attracted its current national attention. They did not necessarily talk about it, even among themselves, because high dropout rates reflected poorly on their administrations. Nevertheless, several districts began regularly publishing dropout statistics and early school leaver studies as early as 1979.[1]

When minority members of his school board asked questions about the large numbers of Hispanics not graduating from San Francisco's public high schools, superintendent Robert Alioto, in a politically expedient move, convened a small group of his colleagues in the fall, 1984 to discuss the "dropout problem" in their districts. The outcome of that initial discussion was an agreement to form the Consortium on Dropout Prevention, which consisted of the Boston, Detroit, New York City, San Diego, and San Francisco school districts and four much smaller, suburban districts.[2] The Consortium's goal was to cooperatively gather and share information about dropout prevention practices in member districts. Its work over the next 18 months resulted in the development of some interesting findings about the status of dropout prevention in those nine districts.

During that same time period (1985 and 1986), more school districts were beginning to address the problem directly, and

recognized the need to develop prevention strategies. By late 1985, several districts had established task forces, planning teams, or work groups to conduct program planning and/or community forums.[3] In the spring, 1986, the Ford Foundation decided to build on the developing district movement around dropouts by funding a series of planning grants for districts to work collaboratively with their communities on dropout prevention. The Urban Dropout Prevention Collaboratives Program is now operating in 21 cities, including three prior members of the Consortium on Dropout Prevention (Detroit, New York City, and San Diego) and several others which had already begun actively working on the problem.

The purposes of this paper are to 1) provide a brief overview of these two projects, their goals and expected outcomes, and 2) discuss the potential of district-based and community-wide approaches to reduce dropout rates. The projects are described in more detail elsewhere,[4] so they will be summarized here. The Consortium's work is completed, and its findings will also be summarized. The dropout collaboratives, however, are still in the planning phase, so preliminary information will be presented about their planning, data gathering, and collaborative activities.

CONSORTIUM ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

Overview

At their first formal meeting in February, 1985, superintendents from the nine Consortium districts discussed the possibility of gathering information about effective dropout prevention programs around the country. By the end of that day, they had come to understand that little evidence existed indicating the effectiveness of any of these programs (i.e., evaluations had not been conducted to prove either their success or failure).[5] Nevertheless, they believed that a practical approach would be to 1) look at what was already occurring in the name of dropout prevention and 2) determine which programs or strategies they could implement in their districts' schools. They were clearly disposed toward district-initiated, but school-based, programmatic solutions. Consultant staff to the Consortium suggested they first do a survey of their own schools.

They decided that a survey of high schools and middle schools in their districts might yield useful information about why students were dropping out, how schools were dealing with the problem programmatically, and which practices appeared to be "promising," given the limited evaluation data available. They wanted answers to the following questions.

1) What are the characteristics of students in member schools?

2) Why, in the perception of school administrators, are students leaving school before graduation?

3) What relationships exist between student characteristics and administrators' perceptions about why they drop out?

4) What dropout prevention programs exist in the schools and what are the characteristics of these programs?

5) What relationships exist between perceptions about why students drop out and the school-based programs designed to prevent dropouts?

6) What local evidence exists to support the notion that a program is effective?

A survey instrument was consequently designed to collect information on student demographic characteristics, administrators' perceptions about why students drop out, school procedures for identifying high-risk students, policies perceived to "push" students out of school, and characteristics of programs for high-risk students. The survey was distributed to principals of all high schools (224) and middle schools (340) in the nine districts in 1985. Completed surveys were returned by 277 schools (49 percent). Just over half of these schools reported operating at least dropout prevention program in the 1984-85 school year. Of the 230 school programs reviewed, about 60 percent were in high schools.

Findings

Detailed information about types of programs and other data collected through the survey are presented in another report:[6] results pertinent to a discussion about district-based approaches to dropout prevention are delineated below.

1) No significant patterns existed between school administrators' perceptions about why their students were dropping out and the types of prevention programs operating in the schools. Dropout prevention programs in these districts tended to be designed to address the symptoms of potential dropouts (e.g., low achievement,

low attendance, and behavior problems), even though school administrators had strong perceptions about the actual reasons students drop out.

2) Most reported programs (about 80 percent) were self-contained and/or supplementary to the regular school program, rather than systemic attempts to change the school environment or to serve a variety of student needs.

3) Roughly 10 percent of dropout prevention programs had been initiated at the district level and were operating in multiple school sites. Nearly all of the school-initiated programs were operating in only one school. Counted individually, therefore, the proportions of school-reported programs were 40 percent district-initiated and 60 percent school-initiated.

4) Only 13 percent of the programs were being formally evaluated. (About a third of these were district-initiated programs.) For another 26 percent, some record keeping was being maintained on graduation rates, retention in program, attendance, courses passed, and/or achievement test scores. The remaining 61 percent of programs reported no evaluations or data collection.

The District-Based Approach

Based on the Consortium's work, four issues emerge as critical to district leadership in dropout prevention. The first is superintendents' instincts to look "out there" for model dropout prevention programs. A second is the implicit assumption that programs developed elsewhere will be suitable, perhaps with some modification, for their own students. The third is their expectation that effective programs will be identified, despite the limited importance they usually place on evaluation. The fourth is a focus on programmatic rather than systemic solutions.

Program search. Looking outside for programs and strategies is not necessarily an inappropriate approach to problem solving. To do that first, however, before taking an inventory of what already exists within the district, shortchanges the efforts of

building administrators and faculty who are closely tuned into student needs. Many of the Consortium superintendents did not realize the extent to which individual schools in their districts had taken the lead in designing and adapting dropout programs: they were even skeptical at first that any useful information would be collected through the survey. The surprising result was that over half of the schools responding to the survey already had programs and the majority of these had been developed in the schools.

Although it could not be determined how effective these programs were, it was clear that many were developed because the schools' staff were dismayed by the extent and intensity of the dropout problem. Staff saw on a daily basis the results of student disengagement, truancy, extensive absenteeism, and class cutting. They realized that incentives had to be provided to keep students in school.

Their concern and attempts to address the problem would have made them valuable contributors to a coordinated district effort to study the problem, inventory existing services, and design alternative solutions. This could have been done as a first step without looking outside the district at that point.

Suitability. Another form of contribution from school staff, as evidenced to some extent in survey responses, could have been a careful assessment of why their students were dropping out. School administrators who responded to the survey showed clear patterns of insight about reasons for dropping out among the different racial and ethnic student groups, as exemplified below.

1) Administrators in schools with large minority enrollments tended to perceive a more varied range of reasons for students dropping out.

2) More "personal" than "institutional" factors were perceived as reasons for Hispanic student dropouts.

3) More "institutional" than "personal" factors were perceived as reasons for Black high school dropouts.

4) The significant relationships between white student enrollments and various reasons for dropping out were negatively correlated.

In general, high school administrators perceived that students' home and family problems, low self-expectations, need to work, poor academic performance, failure to meet graduation requirements, and boredom with school were the major reasons their students dropped out. Middle school administrators' perceptions were that students drop out due to home and family problems, poor academic performance, and boredom with school.

Interestingly, very few administrators attributed early school leaving to problems with and conrtrollable by the schools themselves. Factors which clearly reflected institutional resources and policies (e.g., school climate, teacher morale, teachers' expectations, counseling, facilities, and discrimination) were seldom cited as contributory factors to dropping out.

These results suggest that, although awareness about the complex circumstances affecting students' decisions to drop out of school is increasing, school administrators continue to focus on the students and their backgrounds as causes for dropping out or on the symptoms which lead to dropping out, rather than the actual reasons.

Questions must focus on why students drop out: schools must look beyond the superficial explanations to the causes behind them.

School systems can take the lead in this inquiry. They can provide resources, technical assistance, data collection and analysis capacity, etc. The purpose would be to discover the unique needs of the students who populate their schools, which will depend greatly on the socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic/racial mix, and achievement levels of high-risk students. Once these unique needs are identified, dropout prevention programs can be designed, modified, or adopted.

Evaluation. Attempts to identify and adopt "effective" program models are severely limited by the lack of evaluative information about dropout programs. Two years after the Consortium's survey, more dropout prevention programs are being evaluated, but the literature suggests that very few have been studied for a long enough time period to show conclusive results. As Terry Orr has pointed out in the final chapter of her sourcebook of 14 dropout prevention models:[7]

> ...it must be noted that while the programs covered in this sourcebook represent model approaches to working with potential and actual dropouts, the degree to which they do so effectively is unclear. Very few have been adequately evaluated, and a few lack even basic bookkeeping information on how many students completed the program.

Some dropout prevention programs and alternative schools have a reputation for successfully graduating large numbers of high-risk students. Although these programs tend to keep data on attendance, graduations, academic progress, and/or test scores, few of them have been studied to determine the causes for their apparent success and

how they compare to regular school programs in terms of reduced dropout rates.

Program evaluation is particularly critical in dropout prevention as more districts and schools around the country attempt to develop and implement their own programs or identify programs for adaptation. Much time and effort may be wasted unless there is evidence that: 1) a potential model for adoption is effective when compared to regular school programs; 2) selected program components or strategies can be shown to directly cause a reduction in dropout rates; and 3) the cost of dropout prevention is reasonable in light of observed outcomes. Educators should be asking what types of prevention programs work for different student needs, which do not, and what costs are involved.

School districts can take the lead by funding systematic evaluations of dropout prevention programs to answer these questions. When monies are appropriated for the programs, a small percentage of additional monies should be set aside for evaluating them. The importance of knowing whether a program really works or not should not be underestimated: assumptions made about program effectiveness without appropriate evaluation can cause misunderstanding, premature program closings, and inflated success stories.

Systemic solutions. Around the country, school systems are more likely to be focusing on programmtic rather than systemic solutions to the dropout problem. Intensely focused programs, aimed at improving attendance or basic skills, for example, are often very costly and may be simply stopgap measures. However,

self-contained, supplementary programs for specially targeted groups of students are easier to design and implement than systemic change. This is a major reason why they are central to the dropout prevention "movement."

Advocates for systemic change have tended to be the more "radical" voices in the education profession. Their view is that schools not only reinforce the disengagement of high school and middle school students, but actually practice "push out" policies which rid the schools of troublemakers and those who are difficult to teach.[8] They stress that only sweeping changes in how schools are run, their priorities, staff attitudes, and the curriculum itself will lead to reductions in the dropout rate.

Neither systemic nor programmatic approaches have thus far proven to reduce the dropout rate. They may both be viable mechanisms, but they each must be demonstrated and evaluated. The programmatic approach is currently being implemented in school districts around the country.

One way to approach a systemic solution is to involve the entire community in efforts to solve the problem. Although the Consortium's survey did not specifically ask about non-school services, it was evident from program descriptions that very few districts use the resources of social service agencies, community and business groups, parents, or religious and civic organizations as integral components of their dropout programs. Only about a dozen schools had programs involving community in some way.

There is growing awareness, however, that school dropouts happen due to a combination of internal and external factors

affecting students' in-school and out-of-school lives. Very little is known about the extent to which students' attitudes and behaviors are taken into school or learned through school experiences. It is clear that the dropout problem is extremely complex and that schools should not be expected to resolve it in isolation. This was the Ford Foundation's orientation when it designed the Urban Dropout Prevention Collaboratives Program in the spring, 1986.

URBAN DROPOUT PREVENTION COLLABORATIVES

Overview

The focus of the dropout collaboratives program is on the development of informed, culturally sensitive, collaborative dropout prevention initiatives which involve the school system and major community groups in 21 U.S. cities. The program's objectives are as follows:

1) to foster school-community collaboratives which approach the dropout problem in each city from both school-related and external perspectives;

2) to encourage these dropout prevention collaboratives to gather existing dropout information so that planning is informed by prior experience in each system;

3) to enable collection and analysis of student data about local causes for dropping out; and

4) to assist in developing cause-specific, cross-institutional dropout prevention strategies.

The motivating belief behind this initiative is that both in-school and out-of-school factors influence students dropping out, so solutions to the problem must come from the community as well as the school system. Collaboratives are expected to plan solutions with informed will; they should examine their dropout statistics and learn more about why particular students in their communities drop out, and then systematically develop solutions which meet the needs of several categories of students who are at risk.

The Ford Foundation has provided the 21 cities with technical assistance from four intermediary agencies, each of which is

working with four to six cities. Agency teams are facilitating community involvement, providing guidance in information gathering about local reasons for dropping out, assisting in the development of open and informed planning, and providing resources about research on dropouts and existing practices and models.

The collaboratives program is being documented in order to learn from events which facilitate and hinder implementation, and to build an "institutional memory" which can help in related initiatives.[9] The documentation team has been conducting site visits since the fall, 1986 at eight intensive sites, and gathering other data from the remaining 13 cities.

The four major focuses of the documentation are on collaboration, planning, information gathering, and technical assistance. The status of each of these four activities is discussed in this paper, based on findings during the first six months of program implementation. These preliminary findings are interesting because they provide some insight into the processes, politics, and structure of community-wide planning for dropout prevention.

Findings

Collaboration. The 21 city collaboratives are at various stages in their progress toward developing dropout prevention strategies. This is influenced somewhat by who is coordinating the planning and who is doing the work, e.g., chairpersons, district staff, planning sub-committees, or outside consultants.

Many of the collaboratives took several months to establish

procedures, elect chairpersons, delegate work to subcommittees, and/or hire consultants. Although it is not yet clear which factors influence each collaborative's pace, the designation of leadership and willingness of "leaders" to move ahead have been important variables.

The collaboratives also differ greatly in the types and scope of involvement by non-school groups, particularly the business sector. Only a few cities have had disproportionate involvement by school system staff, and in most of these cases, intermediary agencies have intervened to encourage more participation by outside groups. The roles of outside groups are seldom well-balanced: a business leader or a media representative takes charge, or a combination of direct service and/or advocacy groups have more influence, or the school system is really "running the show." In some cases, co-chairs have been appointed, including a school district administrator and community or business leader, and planning has gone more smoothly.

Planning. Most of the collaboratives are adhering to planning activities delineated in their grant proposals. Many are slightly behind due to late start-up or delays in establishing structure and procedures.

Their planning structures vary. Some collaboratives are process-oriented, i.e., their general meeting agendas have specific "decision" items, much discussion ensues around each decision, and tasks are assigned before the next item is discussed. Other collabortives started with two or three major task forces (e.g., for data base development, conference planning,

and dropout interviews), which independently pursue their activities and report to the whole collaborative on a monthly or bimonthly basis. Others have a handful of sub-committees carrying out different planning tasks, sometimes duplicating effort, and meeting much more often than the whole collaborative.

Within these structures, the roles of collaborative members also vary. In one city, each task force is chaired by a prominent community leader, but the bulk of the work is done by school system staff. In another city, mixed-member sub-committees rely on contracted consultants to report progress on research and data collection. In still another, the chief executive officer of the city's largest industry chairs the collaborative and delegates tasks to members.

Planning activities at this point generally include completion of information gathering about local causes for dropping out, developing agendas for community-wide conferences or "forums" to report and discuss their findings, reviewing descriptions of dropout prevention programs and models, outlining dropout prevention plans, and thinking about funding for implementation in the fall. Some collaboratives are already writing first drafts of plans, apparently without regard to results of their information gathering activities.

Information gathering. Most of the collaboratives are conducting at least two forms of data collection: data base development/refinement and interviewing dropouts and, in some cases, potential dropouts. Several cities are also undertaking inventories of existing dropout programs and services by surveying

schools, social service agencies, and related organizations.

For the most part, work on school system data bases is being conducted by district staff, usually in research and evaluation offices. The status of the data bases ranges from being non-existent (except for hand-written records) in one city, to a sophisticated data base in another, where dropout "tracking" data are being added.

Interviewing of dropouts and high-risk students is being done in several cities by graduate students from nearby universities, contracted consultants, teachers, or students. Many of the cities have relied on their intermediary agencies to recommend survey questions or to provide training in interviewing techniques.

Cities which are conducting inventories of existing programs and services are making full use of the collaborative's network to locate agencies and other organizations which have been working with school dropouts. Several plan to publish resource directories for use by families and potential dropouts.

Technical assistance. Collaboratives are relying in a variety of ways on their intermediary agencies, whose services range from simple information dissemination to integral process facilitation for planning, problem solving, and identifying key community leaders. Agency roles appear to depend largely on the leadership capacity in each collabortive. They are doing more "technical assistance" activities, e.g., promoting on-task behavior, identifying resources for planning and information gathering, and training. In several cities, however, they are

playing more of a "change agent" role, where they influence process, planning, and decision making. The facilitation (non-directive) role, in contrast to an intervention (directive) role, has emerged as a critical issue in the collaborative process.

The Community-Wide Approach

Community-wide planning and school-community cooperation are not new concepts. Strong belief in the promise of "inside/outside" collaboration in solving educational problems has generated numerous projects through which businesses, universities, and social service agencies provide resources to schools (recently, for example, the Adopt-a-School model and a variety of school-university "partnerships"). It is therefore difficult to argue against the benefits of community-wide participation in dropout prevention.

The dropout collaboratives program is showing that the process of school-community cooperative planning is possible. It is at times awkward and always politically problematic, but it is actually happening in the 21 cities participating in the program.

Most important are the expected outcomes of the planning phase, which probably would not happen if the school systems were working in isolation. Given the progress of the collaboratives thus far, there is every reason to believe that communities will continue to be involved in the implementation of dropout prevention strategies.

The collaboratives are not expected to develop a single, systemwide prevention program which meets the needs of all high-risk students in the district. Program guidelines urge

collaboratives to identify local causes for dropping out and to distinguish the unique needs of various student groups. It is hoped that a set of strategies, which are essentially customized, will be developed in each city. Whether or not these strategies call for systemic change or the implementation of new programs remains to be seen. In any case, the potential for community-wide leadership in dropout prevention may be realized in the following critical issues raised by the dropout collaborative program.

A balanced perspective. Collaboratives which stress "inside/outside" leadership promise to bring a more balanced perspective to planning activities. While school people pick up on the home and family problems students take into school, community leaders are more likely to examine the school environment and practices which contribute to students dropping out.

The challenge will be for "insiders" and "outsiders" to recognize their organizational limitations and their potential contributions, and to mutually consider these in the development of a community-wide approach to dropout prevention. The extent to which collaborative members come to share a common understanding of the social and economic, as well as academic implications of high dropout rates, will greatly influence the continuity of a community-wide initiative to prevent school dropouts.

Cross-cultural awareness. The need to go into the community to find youth who already dropped out of school has been informative for both school system and community leaders. In one city, for example, several trips to a remote Appalachian

settlement in the district resulted in a better understanding of those students' neighborhood environment and the forces which tended to isolate them from their fellow students. Forays to local teenage "hangouts," social service agencies, and dropouts' homes have also given collaborative members a heightened understanding of what different groups of students are doing instead of being in school.

Community resources. The collaboratives' goal to develop cross-institutional dropout prevention strategies requires a careful assessment of existing and potential services from non-school sources. Assessment and planning activities in themselves have contributed to a new awareness of the types of problems dropouts encounter and the myriad of services which have already been implemented for them by external agencies (e.g., job training, teenage pregnancy, and counseling programs). An important challenge for the collaboratives will be the translation of these services into intervention mechanisms for potential dropouts who are still attending school but are in serious danger of leaving if their needs are not addressed.

Another form of community resource, which could be provided by businesses, the media, and other groups which do not provide direct services to youth, is technical assistance to school systems. As planning proceeds, it has become apparent that collaborative members in many cities have planning, development, problem solving, training, networking, and resource identification skills which could benefit school systems tremendously. Non-school members' involvement in planning dropout prevention

strategies should increase their awareness of student and school system needs and their understanding of ways in which their organizations can provide resources and technical assistance.

The development of dropout prevention strategies which incorporate valuable non-school services and resources is critical to community-wide leadership in dropout prevention.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

In this paper, district-based and community-wide approaches to addressing the school dropout problem have been discussed. Set within a larger context, they must be understood in relation to federal and state dropout prevention initiatives. Given that understanding, it is important to realize that both community leadership and school district leadership are critical to successful dropout reduction. A major issue in this discussion is the potential for success by either system without integral cooperation from the other.

The differential issues which emerge for school district and community-wide leadership are delineated in this paper. They are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the focus of each system's leadership can and should be on different issues, which can be resolved better collaboratively, and which can be represented on a continuum of needs assessment, information gathering, resource identification, planning, and implementation activities.

Perhaps the real issue is process over content. A great deal is already known about dropout prevention,[10] albeit much must still be learned about local reasons for dropping out and effective ways to address varying student needs. School systems and community groups tend to work in isolation from each other, often duplicating information gathering efforts, ignoring the wisdom and experience of the other system, and developing programs without regard to what already exists. Collaborative planning and conscious development of cross-institutional prevention strategies may be the process which successfully combines "inside/outside" leadership potential.

FOOTNOTES

1
See, for example, The Dropout Report. New York City Public Schools, Brooklyn, New York, October, 1979; "Early School Leavers: High School Students Who Left Before Graduation, 1982-1983," Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles, CA, 1983; and "A Study of the Longitudinal Dropout Rate: 1980 Eighth-Grade Cohort Followed From June, 1980 through February, 1985," Dade County Public Schools, Miami, FLA, 1985.

2
These smaller districts included Ossining, New York, and Grossmont, Sweetwater, and Tamalpais High School Districts in CA.

3
Among Ford cities, these included Cincinnati, Hartford, Los Angeles, San Antonio, San Diego, and Tucson.

4
See Clark, T.A. and Irizarry, R.A. "Identifying School-Based Dropout Prevention Strategies: A Survey of High School and Middle School Programs in Nine Cooperating Districts." New York City: New York University, 1986 and "Urban School Dropout Prevention Collaboratives: School-Community Cooperation in Addressing Local Needs." A Ford Foundation Working Paper, New York City, 1986.

5
Some two dozen dropout prevention programs, validated by the U.S. Office of Education's Joint Dissemination Review Panel since 1972, do have evidence indicating effectiveness.

6
Clark and Irizarry, Ibid.

7
"What Do We Do About Youth Dropouts? A Sourcebook of Solutions." New York City: SEEDCO, 1986.

8
See, for example, the Fine and Wehlage and Rutter articles in the Spring, 1986 issue of the Teachers College Record.

9
The documentation is being coordinated by Terry Clark with grants from The Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation.

10
Hahn, A. and Danzberger, J. Dropouts in America. Enough is Known for Action. Washington, D.C. : Institute for Educational Leadership, 1987.